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THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

VOL. VI, No. 5 UNION COLLEGE : SCHENECTADY, N. Y. MAY, 1944

For the Tool Chest

After ten years of teaching composition to college freshmen, I have found that the most useful tools of my trade are passages lifted from current literature to illustrate and reinforce the theory of good writing.

However I often find that the perfectly apt illustration for each specific point is hard to locate, and I have often wished that I might trade the things I find useful for things that others have proved in their classrooms.

This trading could best be carried on in a regular column or page of the CEA Newsletter. The interested members could use this monthly exchange of ideas as a sort of community tool chest. One teacher having found some approach useful for building themes in his class could pass on a suggestion to other teachers; other teachers could borrow the idea and use it as long as it worked for them. If the tool broke in their hands, or worked better for them after it had been bent, or seemed more efficient after a special polishing, then the teacher who had used it might put it back in the tool chest in a new form for still others to use or improve.

Here is the kind of thing that would help me . . . an illustration of increasing interest and vitality produced by definite colorful imagery.

* * *

Maisie Ward's "Gilbert Keith Chesterton" contains a chapter on Bernard Shaw which she submitted to him for revision and correction. She has published a facsimile of Shaw's scribbled emendations of her typescript.

Miss Ward wrote:
". . . and that they did not like."

Shaw emended:
" . . . and that spoilt their comfort."

* * *

Miss Ward wrote:
"And so the literary public elected to say that Shaw and Chesterton did not really mean what they said, did not really mean anything at all."

Shaw emended:
"And so the literary public elected to say that Shaw and Chesterton were having a cheap success by standing on their heads and declaring that black was white."

* * *

I have yet to present these passages to any student who did not immediately see in them one of the things I try to teach. They have worked for me, and I hope they will work for someone else.

—Frank Sullivan,
St. Louis University.

ENGLISH OBJECTIVES

I submit the following as possible functions of a college department of English:

(1) The reflection of human civilization in the literary records of the past.

(2) Historical perspective thru the study of literature from period to period.

(3) A summary of the ideas and ideals of the English-speaking race, with comparisons from world literature (concepts of truth, beauty, goodness, sweetness and light; liberty, justice, democracy and the many rewards of right-living).

(4) Acquaintance with the great personalities of literature, —both authors and characters in literature, even fiction.

(5) Cultivation of good reading habits to solve the problem of the use of leisure time. The friendship of books can be formed or greatly stimulated in college, — to say nothing of the more practical use of magazines and newspapers. When we get the student really interested in this business of individual culture there may be some incentive for him to start a private library while he is in college.

In connection with the problem of leisure time, I am reminded that the word school goes back to the Greek word for leisure. Leisure in college? Some would deny it. Well, "leisure for learning in college" would be a very fine slogan in certain walks of our academic life.

(6) Cultivation of the spirit of library exploration — examination of the literary resources of the college, which can be both a very practical thing and a very romantic thing, a thrilling adventure, indeed. The library, long called the heart or center of any college, but sometimes treated like a cold grey building of stone, a prison for books, can be made a pleasant grazing ground, with green pastures in a veritable land of promise. If we can get our students to use the library intelligently, both for instruction and pleasure, we shall be giving them various keys to self-obtained individual culture.

(7) Development of correct use of the Mother Tongue in both written and oral expression; with perhaps some attempt to achieve that elusive quality called style.

(8) Preparation for better conversation on a variety of topics, the outgrowth of literary knowledge.

(9) Preparation for better personal correspondence. Letter-writing in our age has degenerated, and needs a renaissance.

(10) Preparation for intelligent, critical and often appreciative attendance at plays and motion pictures.

(11) Preparation in the same way for the better radio programs, as well as all public addresses, including sermons.

(12) Preparation for travel to the ends of the earth. Literature can make a man feel at home in all times and all places.

(13) A general, and I hope not unlucky, postscript to the dozen points just given—enjoyment of later life through contact with three worlds; the world of nature, the world of people, and the world of books (concentrated humanity). The study of literature develops the critical faculty, universal interest, imagination, and sympathy. I wish more people knew and believed that!

—William Eben Schultz,
Illinois Wesleyan University

MLTA — An Objection

Professor Foerster's suggestion for a Modern Language Teachers Association has a laudable motive but it does not appeal to me for the following reasons:

1. Teachers of the various foreign languages already have their organizations (Association of American Teachers of German, and so on) through which they can discuss their various specific problems. Merging these and adding the teachers of English would make another oragnization as unwieldy and as divided in interest as the present MLA. The teachers of the foreign languages, I believe, do not care to be bracketed with English teachers, in part because our large numbers tend to run away with an organization, and in part because there are fundamental differences in our basic problems. Actually it seems to me that we have far more in common with high school teachers of English than with college teachers of the foreign languages.

2. I too would like to see some changes in policy of the MLA, which seems to be resting largely on laurels won by an earlier generation and also to be suffering from a too narrow conception of scholarly activity. But there is room for an organization representing scholarly (and I would like to add, critical) interests in our field, and these have much in common with those of other languages. I do not believe that the MLA as at present constituted or as it is likely to be constituted in the near future is a good nucleus for an association of teachers.

(Continued on Page 2)

Give Composition A Chance

Basing this discussion on opinion and not on statistics, I should like to suggest that the present sorry plight of the humanities, eloquently and justly lamented by many writers, is due, in part, to inadequate consideration of the problem of composition in American education; and, further, that the new revivification of humanistic studies, as represented by literature, will depend in, part, in giving in the future at least a fair chance to the teaching of composition.

All things considered (student background, and conditions in grade school, high school, and college), composition teaching has been done as well as—in fact, better than—could be expected. But there is much criticism that it has been ineffective when judged by the amount of time and money invested compared with the results obtained.

The charge is frequently made that our students do not know how to read (part of the plight of the humanities is due, we are told, to the fact that students have little understanding of the literary masterpieces they are supposed to read and understand). How much of this failure is the fault of the composition teacher is debatable. But present indications (as seen, for example, in the ASTP and V-12 programs) are that training in reading is, logically, a part of training in writing, and therefore to the other duties of composition teachers is to be added the more effective training of students in reading understandingly the writings of others.

An even more serious charge is that our students cannot "write". We ourselves admit the truth of this charge against some of our students (confessions occasionally appear in the columns of The News Letter). We hear this charge repeated by colleagues in other departments, and by teachers in graduate and professional schools. Worst of all, perhaps, is the charge that many an English teacher and many a reputable English scholar cannot write either effectively or correctly. A few years ago a president of the MLA stated that if he were given a dollar for each error in composition present in the manuscripts submitted to PMLA, he would be a very wealthy man within a year.

These charges are not surprising in the light of the unhappy conflict between composition and literature teaching, a conflict in which composition has never had a fair chance. Present even within one individual, when he is both composition and literature teacher, this

(Continued on Page 3)

THE NEWS LETTER

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BURGES JOHNSON

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Editorial

There is much futile discussion of Education, because people so seldom know just what other people mean when they use the word. Webster gives eight different definitions, and adds one more when listing synonyms. Dean Inge dismisses the matter simply and briefly: he says that "education is the throwing of false pearls before real swine"; but we had better expunge that from the record.

Education is what happens when a man and a boy walk and talk and work and play together. The man begins with object lessons, and the boy imitates; the boy asks questions; the man utters a few wise precepts; the boy deviates from them experimentally; the man criticizes; the boy doubts the validity of the criticism, and proceeds by a process of trial and error to go forward alone. But from time to time he finds himself recalling a few of the precepts and many of the examples.

There is one bothersome period when the boy comes to be sure that the man is always wrong. During that time the man is inclined to lose his temper. But even then he teaches something without knowing it; for long ago we were told that one of the greatest services rendered by the American home is that it teaches young people how to get along with disagreeable adults.

This elementary educational system has worked pretty well for a few thousand years. Father and son, mother and daughter, master and apprentice have walked and talked and worked profitably together. But civilization speeded up and the old method proved too slow. The next step was to have a dozen youths walk and talk and work with one man, each enjoying one-twelfth of his attention. Then came still greater efficiency: several thousand young people, of both sexes (God help us!) walking and talking and working (or trying to avoid talking and working) with several hundred adults all at one time within a confined space. The limitations of time and space are such that there is no room for walking together, so the young people are placed in rows—if not in tears—and there is time for only one person to do the talking. It was when this came about that we began to study pedagogy.

Pedagogy is the assembling of all the devices by which one adult can teach hundreds of children at once, and the discovery of scientific reasons why such devices are the best ways to teach. For instance, the discovery of some type of examination which can be marked by machinery is a pedagogical triumph; but the finding of reasons why that kind of examination is the best way to test an individual child's progress is an even greater triumph. The invention of the "true-false" type of examination question was a triumph of yesterday, but it deserves mention. The hard work is done by the teacher who has to formulate the questions; the easy work by the pupil who is offered a fifty-percent chance of guessing right. Pedagogy has busied itself to prove that an examination of that sort is truly scientific.

Examining children in job-lots is so complicated a problem that teachers with pedagogical minds may become more interested in the examination than in the child. Teaching young people in large batches presents so many complicated problems that in time these problems become more interesting than the young people who are to be taught. Every teacher who deliberately chooses the teaching profession in preference to others, and thinks of it as something more than merely making a living, is forever trying to break down the formal structure erected to "educate" in quantity, and get back to the man and boy walking, talking, and working together. Whereas the teacher who finds teaching a drudging routine and would escape from it is forever trying to get away from the individual young person, and wanting to teach them in job-lots. He grows fonder and fonder of statistics and classifications and card systems. We remember a dean of women who kept such a perfect card system filled out in such detail that it became quite unnecessary for her to meet the girls themselves. By a study of the cards she could solve all individual problems. And we knew of a dean who had such a wonderful card-index system he could be absent a week at a time while it ran his office for him.

Such people love to talk about norms and medians; such people can write in a text-book, "Some one brain process is always preponent above its concomitants in arousing action elsewhere;" or declare that "Each total situation-response-bond is composed of minor bonds from parts of the situation to parts of the response, because man's native equipment of sensory neurones is such a set of analytical organs as it is."

But this editorial began by discussing definitions of education, so it is only proper that we should end it by offering one of our own: "Education is that process by which accretions to the contentual and potential mentality of preadolescence are developed by attention to the howness and the whyness and whichness of objective experiences as they are correlated to concomitants in establishing the fixitivity of the norm and the preponent responses of the neurones, assuming maximum feasible self-direction; and when that is attended to, let us hope they will not fall on the buttered side."

Any perplexities which may have been caused our readers by the appearance of our March issue in April, and our April issue in May will be cleared up by the usual summer hiatus. In the meantime our files remain in good order. The next issue of this pillar will appear, according to routine, in October. But any influx of manuscript from members who are moved to speak up in meeting may compel a mid-summer issue, as was the case last summer. In the meantime your Secretary-Editor is eagerly seeking his own successor.

Gleaned From the Mail

Dear Editor:

In view of present disturbed conditions in the college world and of anticipated radical changes likely to take place during the period of postwar adjustment, I have a strong and lively conviction that the sphere of work and influence of the College English Association should be extended and strengthened by dignified publicity. If the CEA is not unique, it is indeed distinctive in the field of the humanities. Its leadership and its membership have demonstrated the fact both by nominal association with the CEA and by active contribution to its undertakings. The News Letter is a monthly, invigorating breeze blowing into professorial offices and classrooms. Of the "learned" or "semi-learned" journals that I receive, most I file on my shelves with a feeling of "Well, I'll have to look through this and perhaps read a lot of it"; but I have noted that The News Letter always gets on-the-spot attention and, for the most part, an immediate, interested reading. Surely the blend of vitalized learning and of professional liveliness which this publication achieves, and which is characteristic of the CEA, is a helpful and hopeful influence on American education. More power to the CEA!

—Arthur Palmer Hudson,
Univ. of North Carolina.

If you enjoy the Newsletter, why not support it? Dues, for the balance of the year to new members, one dollar.

MLTA—An Objection

(Continued from Page 1)

3. Rather than found a new association, I would recommend a strengthening of our present ones. Although the function of the CEA is a little vague, even to its members, it is an agreeable group and at its best has a certain stimulus to offer. The NCTE is a going concern and is increasingly representative, I believe, of the varied professional interests of teachers of English. The contents of College English has notably improved in recent years, and the College Section of the Council is gradually asserting its identity and expanding its activities. The incidental association the Council offers with high school teachers is certainly no handicap and is in my opinion definitely profitable, with many possibilities for reciprocal help.

If the membership of these existing organizations exerted their best individual influence to improve and make more complete and stimulating the discussions of their professional interests, I believe we would be better off than by founding a new group.

PORTER G. PERRIN,
Colgate University.

Dear Editor:

Dr. Thomson's article on the Humanities in the April issue gave me particular pleasure. I know you get all manner of suggestions, so I shall add my two cents' worth. I am more than mildly interested in my private theory that Theodore Watts-Dunton, after kidnapping Swinburne, kept him in his house by means of hypnotic control. There are hints of some such method in the various biographies I have read; but Beer, I know, feels that Watts-Dunton was a thoroughly benevolent jailor. I don't, and I would like to be able to ask other literary addicts their opinions. If there could be a department for the exchange of such opinions, it would be nice; but thank you for the paper as it is, and give us more research articles.

—Katherine Scott,
Georgia State College for Women.

Though the Dean may consider such views imprudent,
There is no such thing as an average student.

* * * * * * * *

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Give Composition a Chance

(Continued from Page 1)

conflict is vividly seen in unfortunate jealousies when a department of composition and a department of literature co-exist in the same college, or when the control of an English department is in the hands of a literature specialist.

One such specialist, within the last five years, after a survey of composition in this country, labeled composition teachers the "academic proletariat," who cannot hope for "even moderate academic promotion," who are unfit to be advanced to be teachers of literature. "So," he continued, "at the bottom of almost every large English department lies a kind of morass of unhappy, disillusioned men and women which poisons all its fairer regions. Much of the time and energy of the professors in such departments is devoted to cajoling and disciplining the Freshman English staff."

Little wonder, therefore, that, with this kind of attitude toward and encouragement for composition teachers in many English departments, this investigator labeled freshman composition a failure and called for its abandonment. Even more damaging is the statement by one prominent both as teacher and editor in the kingdom of literature: a statement to the effect that money appropriated in all good faith by academic administrators for the teaching of composition was used, in some measure, to subsidize literary research and courses in literature.

I willingly grant that in the preceding paragraphs the examples, though true, are extreme. I have no desire to encourage further conflict between composition and literature teaching. But for the good of the cause attention should be constantly called to this conflict, and its presence should not be politely ignored or denied.

Give composition a chance! The list of what it can and should accomplish is long. Equally long is the list of reforms needed, and they have been long overdue. From the turn of the century, perhaps earlier, and on through the years to the present, proposed reforms for the improvement of composition have been made from time to time. Now, fifty years later, many of them are still awaiting serious consideration. Perhaps the liberal arts colleges could profit by the example of the technical schools where progress has been made to the extent that the status of composition and of the composition teacher is frequently more satisfactory than it is in humaner institutions which seem more directly concerned with the plight of humanity and the humanities.

Give composition a chance! When students have learned to write, to appreciate good writing, and to read understandingly, there may be a renaissance of interest in the humanities such as could be dreamed of—not foretold—by even the most optimistic, or pessimistic, devotee of humanistic studies. Who knows?

—George S. Wykoff,
Purdue University

Grammar

It has been apparent for years that the study of English grammar has been going into eclipse. That the eclipse is almost total was the appalling but all-too-real discovery made at Arizona State Teachers College recently.

We have always maintained here that grammar is an essential and highly important part of Freshman English. Although the text that we had used is called "English Review Grammar," the study of grammar as we taught it was hardly a review. (How can students review what they haven't had?) Rather, it was drill, drill, and more drill, with special emphasis on the analysis of sentences and the parsing of the parts of speech. We even admitted to critics that we were old-fashioned when it came to grammar, as old-fashioned as Job's patience and Antigone's sense of duty.

With the coming of the Navy V-12 program more grammar texts became necessary. When the publisher responded to our order by telling us that the book was out of print, there was considerable consternation in the department, because the book we had been using was the one we had found which was complete and advanced enough for college students, not too technical or difficult for freshmen, and at the same time firmly based on sound linguistic information.

The book adopted to replace the one out of print was more difficult but infinitely better than the unscholarly and sketchy panaceas for all Freshman English ailments which call themselves complete courses in college English. At least the student had in his hand a book which was a grammar, one that made him realize that the English language has an ancestry, a development, an integrity of its own.

Further increases in enrollment caused increased demand for texts. Imagine our dismay when the publisher of the second book notified us that that book was also out of print!

To be sure, there are other grammar books; but if one investigates, he will find that their number is surprisingly small, that few of them are linguistically sound, that most of them are inadequate, and that the majority are quite old (and probably headed for the same fate which befell the two mentioned above). Such a condition can hardly be blamed on the paper shortage, for there is any number of handbooks and all-purpose volumes, many hastily compiled for the military programs and few with more than a chapter or two on grammar.

We hope that we shall be able to find a book which suits our needs, but that we should experience such difficulty in finding a text in a subject nominally regarded as basic raises certain doubts about the state of college English. I shall phrase them as questions, in the hope that some reader of THE NEWS LETTER can furnish the answers.

1. Is grammar so discredited that no one will undertake to write an adequate text?
2. To what extent have the publishers gained control of the English curriculum by publishing only "popular" and "interesting" texts?
3. Assuming (and we think, rightly) that the present-day high school student comes to college inadequately prepared for further work in English, should we as college English teachers take the responsibility for teaching him the science of his mother tongue?
4. Or, shall we let the study of grammar die the death that seems destined for it?
5. If we don't wish it to die, what can we teachers do to reestablish it in the curriculum?

—James J. Lynch
Arizona State Teachers College at Flagstaff

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What's *Hecuba* to Him?

"I put it over; I put it over, all right, and . . . it just laid there, it did." Thus Frank Tinney used to explain what happened when he tried to share a favorite riddle of his with English show-goers.

The difficulty was not that the answer involved a pun—surely no barrier to an audience in the country which has produced Lewis Carroll's narratives and Torquemada's cross-word puzzles. The tragedy lay in the fact that the riddle, which ran "Why is an old maid like a frozen tomato?" ,and led inevitably into "Because it's hard to-mate-er," assumed that the comedian and his public were speaking the same language. "When I ast the orcesster leader," he subsequently confided to American audiences, "why was an old maid like a frozen termater, he comes back at me, 'I don't know. Why is an old maid like a frozen tomahto?' Why, I didn't have no joke when that guy got through with me, I didn't."

Unlike Mr. Tinney, I am no comedian, unless the sallies of a college lecture-room classify me as one. But there are times when I share his lonely, frustrated feeling that what I am saying is sounding only faintly like a familiar tongue to my hearers.

"What was the point," I ask, knowing that some distasteful minutes lie ahead of us, "of calling that game of tennis 'Homeric'?" And immediately twenty pleasant-enough freshmen assume the vaguely resentful expression of people who are being held accountable for information which is of no moment. The inquisition is on.

It differs from most inquisitions in that it is conducted with the strictest fairness. The victims are selected from the weak and the strong alike; they go down together.

Its results, however, are discouraging th:e word "Homeric" implies nothing to anybody. True, all the proscribed ones know who Homer was—at least they associate him with the proper country—but a few are wobbly as to what he wrote. Regarding his style there is a consistent, if distressing, ignorance.

Heated admonitions ensue. "You must look up all the proper names!" It is apparent, from the expressions of the class, that in this demand I rival an ogre in unreasonableness, if not actually in cruelty. It is as though I had urged twenty people to fill scholastic sieves with water or eat their academic ways through villages of lumpily indigestible porridge.

These survivors of my latest inquisition pout. They pout because a writer has deliberately made himself difficult by involving himself in the past. They pout because, like many other people nowadays, they have become so fond of outlining the subject matter of an essay that they cease to bother about the connotations of the words which go to make it up.

The resentment is only temporary. Next week these same pouters will read of a herculean effort without even a mild surmise as to what sort that is; and Proserpina will frighted let fall her flowers from Dis's wagon, but the twenty will not be there as interested spectators.

Why are these people bringing to the printed page minds guiltless of any knowledge of "Plato and the swing of Pleides," of Job, and of Sir Patrik Spens, and of Launcelot Gobbo? Heaven defend me from attempting to give a final answer to that question. Yet I suspect that the reason for the decline in the fine art of casually spotting a quotation lies more in the disappearance of "rhetoric" and the emergence of "composition" than in anything else.

The old "Reader" which used to lie on study-tables in academies and seminaries was a hodge-podge of elocution, truism, bombast, and sentimentality. Yet with all this pomp and circumstance, it brought to the banjo-players and fudge-makers who studied its amazing miscellany a weath of Biblical reference, mythological allusion, and Shakespearean quotation. People who read it faithfully and supported the intellectual exercise by translating two or three years of Latin emerged from these experiences equipped to read into a page of English prose all that was put into it.

Our newer reader has learned to thank and write more crisply. He has doubtless been wise in discarding much of the shabby grandeur of rthe florid old way of saying things, but he has unfortunately sacrificed some of its vividness and power. By trying to do without the allusions of our older literature, he has put every rich phrase on the level of the merest pretenders of words just making their timorous way into our language.

What's Hecuba to him? Very often she is nothing at all, since he must look her up before he can weep for her. At best she is probably only a scribbled note in the margin of a textbook: "Perso Player wept for. Hamlet II. 2. 584."

—Julia Neely,
Southern Ill. Normal Univ.

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